

Review

Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age. By Stephen D. Lowe and Mary E. Lowe. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018. x + 250 pp. Paper \$25.00. ISBN 9780830852055.

Faith-based universities are sometimes self-exiled societies that believe in traditional ways of doing things, including face-to-face education. When promoting online teaching, instructional designers often hear that teaching a course online will not work because it jeopardizes or even loses any sense of “personal touch” and “community.” When these are lost, teachers lose the cornerstone upon which education—and especially *Christian* education—is built.

The authors of *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age* have argued convincingly for the case of distance education as not only feasible but also biblical, since, as they argue, the apostle Paul could be described as one of the earliest “distance educators” in Christian history. After all, instead of showing up in Corinth in a house, he wrote letters, urging brethren to form fellowship with one another in Christ. Dr. Stephen Lowe and Dr. Mary Lowe of Liberty University have both been veteran administrators and professors of distance education in Christian institutions, and they have written a powerful defense of Christian distance education that hopefully will sway the opinions of doubters.

If done well, learning mediated by digital tools and platforms can promote such gains as “bidirectional learning” and “cognitive surplus” that face-to-face settings may not even afford. We all know the ills of groupthink, when authoritative figures’ opinions cascade to the rest of the group, hushing those who might have additional or even dissenting opinions to contribute. According to the authors, technologies can help to overcome blindness in attention with which groupthink is often associated.

Participants in a digital environment provide nutrients for each other to grow. New tools for assessment, such as social media apps, facilitate collective and iterative writing that may result in work of higher quality, as peer evaluation tends to make students pay more attention to their work. This should challenge educators, in faith-based institutions or not, to seriously examine student assessment methods in this day and age. Should annotated bibliographies be transformed into assignments using tools such as Zotero or Endnote that can better extract data for summaries and writing? Instead of term papers, should educators use digital stories that have the potential to be viewed by a wider audience than the professor and his or her teaching assistant?

Professors often fear losing community when things are taken out of a fixed, physical space. However, as the history of Christianity has proved again and again, evangelism is all about growing beyond tangible spaces. We seek to extend influence beyond, rather than contain it within, physical space. The authors convinced us that the opposite of reality is not virtuality. The lines between what is “real” and what is “virtual”

are indeed blurring. New students pouring into college campuses are now “generation Z” students who have grown up knowing social media all their lives. Living in virtual spaces is what they do. There is much talk about containing their “screen time” but less about productive uses of their screens for learning and spiritual formation. This book can help us go beyond the narrative of disruption and distraction to narratives about engagement and growth.

As demographics change and competition increases, many institutions of higher education are forced to “jump on the bandwagon” by having more distance education offerings. This necessity-based change does not always lead to true transformation, as distance education is not just a mechanical duplication of what professors teach in front of the classroom.

Sometimes Christian ministers and educators try to attract younger generations by being more like them, such as by using Instagram like a teenager. Teenagers would cringe if they saw such imitation. Instead, the authors challenge us to look beyond the substitution of tools and media to see ecologies of learning. In ecologies in the natural world, lillies grow in groups, redwood trees have linked roots, and willows grow beside creeks. In digital ecologies, we sinners have a chance at salvation through *syn*-relationships, or “being together with” others, vertically with Christ and horizontally with one another for growth and learning. We are asked to think through the lens of Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecology of human development, utilizing various layers of developmental environment to promote growth. Such growth will have “organismic interrelatedness,” as well as individualistic developments in physical, intellectual, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual spheres. The authors have taken talk about distance education beyond the cognitive and social presence concepts. Christian distance education, if done well, can be more intentional, more holistic, and more spiritually forming than its traditional counterpart.

Christian distance education can be transformational for instructors as well. I remember how Dr. Thompson of Abilene Christian University stopped wearing a watch after her distance classes to students in Africa and Croatia as she experienced a different sense of time. She said she decided to take the time students need to understand instead of offering rigid slots of time often associated with office hours. For doubters of Christian distance education, I recommend this book; it may discredit some myths about online learning. If you are already practicing online learning, this book will challenge you to see the interconnection of elements and people in your courses.

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